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In the Contra Chasm

Two War Heroes, Battling on Opposite Sides on the Hill

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John Singlaub and Charles Liteky are men of war. Fragments of shrapnel, war's small reminders, remain in their bodies. Both have heroes' medals. Both still feel a call to patriotism and honor.

Today they are advocates on opposing sides of the battle over aid to Nicaraguan rebels (contras)—the contentious issue that, once again, is high drama on Capitol Hill and in the White House. President Reagan heavily lobbies for his proposal to provide the rebels with \$100 million—\$70 million of it military assistance—to fight "the malignancy in Managua." There are closed meetings and press conferences, White House sessions and arm-twisting phone calls, charges of scare tactics and redbaiting.

Watching it unfold and playing their own part to influence the outcome, Singlaub, a retired major general, and Liteky, a congressional Medal of Honor winner, remember past battlegrounds, the killing and dying that shaped their views.

Many members of Congress are uncomfortable with absolutes; in the growing grayness of the Nicaraguan struggle there are no easy "good guys versus bad guys." Their decision hinges on whether they buy Reagan's claim, or the opposing view that contra aid means certain escalation.

However, for Singlaub, of the far right, and Liteky, a former chaplain now of the religious left, certitude is strong. They are archetypal combatants, representative of the high passions and opposing views to be heard tomorrow as the House begins debate.

Despite a slight limp, a reminder of long-ago parachute jumps, Singlaub stalks the halls of Congress with a quickness that belies his 64 years. Singlaub's hair has never been released from its stiff military brush cut except for a time during World War II while running covert operations in France, when he disguised himself as a Frenchman, a cover that would have been blown as soon as the enemy heard his flat American accent.

Singlaub is remembered as the chief of staff of U.S. troops in Korea who was relieved of command after publicly denouncing President Carter's plan to remove troops from Korea. Now he is chairman of an anticommunist brigade that raises millions from private citizens to fund the contras. He is welcomed in Reagan's White House and meets with aide Pat Buchanan, whose heavy-handed tactics ("the Democratic Party will reveal whether it stands with Ronald Reagan and the resistance or Daniel Ortega and the communists") incensed many on the Hill, who charged "McCarthyism."

You can't have a revolution these days without a public relations firm and Singlaub is shepherded by two Clews Communications consultants from press conference to TV shows, from White House meetings to Capitol Hill.

A consultant suggests that Singlaub appear on one show with a representative of the Soviet Embassy. "Listen! I'm fed up with giving time to those miserable propagandists." Singlaub makes nervous facial grimaces as

he sits like a coiled spring in the office of Rep. Richard Cheney (R-Wyo.), an ally who says the votes aren't there yet. Singlaub, brow furrowing on a sharply chiseled face, says fervently that this is the result of "sophisticated disinformation on the part of the Sandinistas."

He dismisses the argument for negotiating through the Contadora process as a "very clever stalling ploy." There is urgency in his voice. "A congressman has got to know that if he votes any delay, votes against this proposal, it will guarantee that U.S. troops are going to have to be used there."

Cheney says, "The biggest problem is getting access to the Democratic side of the aisle." Singlaub nods eager assent as Cheney says, "We will be aggressively working the members and maybe we will ask you to pick up the phone."

Meanwhile, Charlie Liteky (pronounced Lit-key) is approaching the Capitol with 200 other protesters. Forming a long line, they carry cross after cross with the name, age and date of death, documented killings by the contras, such as Victoriano Reytez, age 55, killed this January. Liteky, 55, a tall, slim, graying man in a brown suit, wearing bifocals, stands next to a woman in a wheelchair holding her cross—Benigno Hernandez Calderon, killed 12/27/85, age 16.

A huge sign says, "Sorrow: 10,000 killed. Hope: No Contra Aid."

"My name is Charlie Liteky," he begins. "I'm a Vietnam veteran. For my service in Vietnam, Congress gave me the highest military award. I tell you that, in case anybody wonders if I'm soft on communism," Liteky adds dryly, a pointed reference to the redbaiting frequently directed toward those who oppose contra aid. "I'm here to plead 'remember Vietnam' and get out before it's too late. Not a single country in the world has joined Reagan in his embargo. I am appalled at the documented atrocities." His voice rising, Liteky says, "We are making another quagmire!"

He repeats the story of a woman he met recently in Nicaragua: "I spoke with a mother whose son had been mutilated by the contras. She placed her hand on my chest and said, 'Go to President Reagan. Place your hand on his chest. Ask him to stop killing us.'"

The Witness for Peace group forms a large cross on the Capitol steps. Remembrances of yesterday are in the lined faces of such protesters as William Sloane Coffin. Liteky's tenor voice joins the group singing "Amazing Grace."

When such religious groups are mentioned to Singlaub, he replies that Sandinista leader "Tomas Borge calls them his army of useful fools."

Debate over Nicaragua has escalated into fights over which side commits the most atrocities. And a new form of body count has emerged—whether there are more former Sandinistas or Somocistas in the contra brigade. (Singlaub says Somoza's old national guard, which specialized in death squads, comprises "only 1 percent" of the contras; Liteky argues "that 1 percent happens to be the leaders among the contras"). Members of Congress and activists on both sides compare anecdotal information to prove, on the one hand, that the Sandinistas are oppressive, lying communists and, on the other, that the contras are rapists and murderers.

As the struggle for votes continues, Singlaub and Rep. Robert Dornan (R-Calif.) sit in the corner of the Capitol Hill Club, assessing the value of their morning's press conference with Alvaro Baldizon, a former Nicaraguan deputy interior minister who defected to the United States. Baldizon claims that East German-trained Nicaraguans, disguised as contras, had slaughtered civilians. "Killing their own people to make a political point!" exclaims Dornan.

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Singlaub, a covert warrior in three wars, and Dornan, who calls himself a "strong Reaganaut," are comfortable with spook-speak: "If Baldizon turned out to be a 'double agent' it would probably kill the bill," says Dornan, who adds that he carefully "grilled" him. Singlaub agrees: "I tried to 'break him' but too many things checked out."

Singlaub first discerned a red menace as a UCLA undergraduate before World War II. A communist-led group tried to get control of the newspaper, he says. Singlaub thwarted them by dragging two football players out of practice to vote against their candidate for editor.

His continuing experiences were "very disillusioning"; French resistance soldiers "more interested in collecting weapons to fight for communism after the war than they were in getting the Nazis out. I thought, 'Maybe this is a real threat to the United States.' Then in China I found the same thing, Chinese more dedicated to the Communist cause than in getting the Japanese out of their country."

During the war, Singlaub first trained for the Office of Strategic Services at Washington's Congressional Country Club. "I saw a lot of the club from four inches above grass level. We were snooping and pooping the whole time."

Singlaub led a three-man team that parachuted into occupied France to help organize resistance units. He received his first war wound when "a German sniper bullet went into a slate house and scattered a lot of fragments in my face and nicked my ear." After the war, Singlaub ran espionage operations in Manchuria, China, Mongolia and Siberia. During the Korean War Singlaub was a deputy chief of a CIA mission and later a combat battalion commander. He was wounded again and received the Silver Star.

Once described as a "thoroughly professional soldier," Singlaub is unburdened by perplexing complexities. While Liteky became increasingly troubled by the toll of war, Singlaub sees killing during war as "the purpose of the exercise." He defends backing dictators such as Anastasio Somoza and Ferdinand Marcos, who managed to give wretched excess a bad name. "But Marcos was the guy we had to pay the money to because he was elected!" Even after Benigno Aquino was murdered? He protests, "The thing that has to be learned is that you do not *insult* a leader in public."

As for Somoza, says Singlaub, "the best intentioned dictators go bad. I was among those who suggested that he had 'outlived his usefulness,' but for God's sake don't sponsor an organization that has as its leaders known Marxists." And the national guard? "The contras don't have *enough* of the well-trained Somoza national guard. We need their talents."

During Vietnam, Singlaub ran "covert and clandestine operations into North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia." Singlaub adds, "I've been accused of it, but I had nothing to do with Operation Phoenix," the CIA-sponsored program that led to death-squad-style killings of about 20,000 Vietnamese. "Assassinations? I'm sure it displeased the communists. The philosophy of penetrating enemy territory is a philosophy I agree with. I *hope* the FBI is penetrating some of the terrorists in this country."

Talk turns to the practice of high officials lying about U.S. involvement, as they did during Vietnam. "If you're going to have it covert, it has to be covert. If it's exposed inadvertently, there has to be some way it can be 'plausibly denied.' For example, our ambassador in Korea would say, 'I know nothing about it [Singlaub's covert operations].' And he didn't. He *arranged* that. Had me deal directly with Philip Habib, who was the minister counselor, instead."

"That whole idea has been *lost* with respect to operations in Nicaragua."

Charles Liteky belongs to an opposing force that Singlaub terms "fuzzy-minded liberals," but there was a time when both, no doubt, would have been comfortable with each other.

Liteky, a Navy brat, long believed in the U.S. role in Vietnam. His father, a military careerist, was severely wounded during World War II when his ship was hit by a kamikaze attack. Still he managed to climb into the cockpit of the burning Zero and cut the label out of the pilot's glove for a souvenir.

"He was this big macho man," recalls Liteky. "He would fight at the drop of a hat. Usually there is a time between the element of danger and the sense of fear. But with my father, before the fear came in him, he would react in a very bombastic way." Liteky laughs. "Consequently, he always *won*." Today, Liteky recognizes that his soft-spoken gentleness is a form of rebellion against his father's combativeness.

Coaches were grooming Liteky, a star athlete, for football scholarships when he disappointed them by entering the seminary. That kept Liteky from the Korean War; when Vietnam came along, he went eagerly.

"I believed everything I was doing. I was very much against communism. I still *am*. I hold no brief for the Sandinistas. I just disagree very much with the way this administration is handling it."

Liteky was one of the few chaplains who followed the troops into battle, administering last rites to dying young men.

In 1967, the weaponless priest crawled under fire to within 15 meters of an enemy machine-gun nest, flipped over on his back, wrestled a bleeding and moaning man onto his chest and started digging backward, with his elbows and heels, for about 30 yards to the landing zone. He then stood and dragged the soldier another 40 yards to Medivac choppers. Then he went back for another trapped man. A soldier in Liteky's company once recalled it:

"All afternoon he was bringing up stretchers, ammunition, water. He rose right up like a man deranged, in full face of rockets and small-arms fire, to direct in rescue helicopters. He took off his flight jacket,

and then his fatigue shirt, and threw them over the faces of blown-away comrades." Despite shrapnel wounds from neck to feet, Liteky carried more than 20 men to the landing zone for evacuation.

When President Johnson draped the congressional Medal of Honor around Liteky's neck in 1968, Johnson said, "Son, I'd rather have one of these babies than be president."

A year ago, Liteky appealed at a Hill press conference for a negotiated settlement in El Salvador and Nicaragua. A congressman angrily interrupted. Liteky softly tried again: "I believe in the preciousness of all innocent lives." But the congressman shouted on, "It makes me sick to hear people like you question the motives of the contras!"

Once again, Liteky goes from congressional office to congressional office. The swing vote will be crucial (Liteky, unused to Hill talk, calls them the "swingers"). Some, like Rep. John Spratt (D-S.C.), listen respectfully. "I think like you on the issues," says Spratt, "and then I listen to the other side . . ."

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Talk of Nicaragua is the talk of blind men touching parts of the elephant: "When they [the Sandinistas] came seeking aid in 1980 and 1981, I was the front man for that," says Spratt. "I feel I was used." Other members of Congress feel the administration did not bargain in good faith. And Liteky tells Spratt, "The administration said its intent was not to overthrow the government of Nicaragua, and then the CIA manual talked of overthrowing the government and then Larry Speakes came out and said that was the intent. I said I was going to try to not let this deception happen again." Spratt nods in frustration and says, "You can't get anything clear from the administration. I was just asking [Defense Secretary Caspar] Weinberger what is the military plan of action. His answer was that the purpose [of the contras] is to 'stabilize' the country." The phrase makes everyone in the room laugh.

Liteky sighs and introduces a familiar argument; the oppression and poverty that fostered Marxist revolt. "What about the hypocrisy of all this? Why weren't we concerned about 'freedom and democracy' when Somoza was in office?"

The former priest adamantly disputes Reagan's assertion that supporting the contras will keep U.S. troops out of Nicaragua. "No one believes the contras on their own can overthrow the Sandinistas." Unlike in Vietnam, Liteky feels, "the major [Nicaraguan] towns could be occupied by American troops in just a few weeks. But that's just the beginning. The guerrillas flee to the hills, and they begin again to operate a guerrilla-type warfare."

Liteky is patiently trying to tell Rep. Dornan that he is not for the Sandinistas. He says nothing about his heroism when he tells Dornan that he was with the 199th Light Infantry Brigade in Vietnam. Dornan brightens. "I went out with them in the field [as a broadcast journalist] and they gave me their wristwatch, an \$18 special. They had a *black* commander!" "That's right," Liteky says quietly, "Brigadier General Davis."

"Say," Dornan starts again, in full Rotarian chitchat, pointing to Liteky's lapel pin, "Is that a J for Jesuit?" No, says Liteky, it is a sword beaten into the shape of a plowshare. "It was made from the remains of a fighter plane." Dornan's triumphant response: "It's aluminum, then!"

On the Hill there is generally a bemused reaction when Liteky mentions morality and nonviolence as he now does with Dornan. "I'm not a great advocate of the Sandinistas," he begins for the hundredth time. "But that doesn't mean we have to be complicit in that kind of immorality. I am not responsible for what they do, but I *am* responsible for what my tax money is backing in Nicaragua." His voice fills with pain. "I think they are guilty of some of the most *atrocious* atrocities. I am talking of the morality of it all."

Their dissimilar quests take Singlaub and Liteky away from their homes for long periods. Singlaub's tax-exempt Council for World Freedom—the U.S. chapter of the World Anti-Communist League—has raised a large part of the estimated \$10 million for medical and nonlethal aid for the contras. U.S. law prohibits private funding for arms and ammunition, but Singlaub says "there is nothing illegal about banks sending money to overseas accounts—and then we can buy arms over there. You just can't deduct it from your taxes."

Singlaub says he has rid the council of its fringe element. "We had a Mexican chapter that was really kooky. Blamed everything on the Jews. Even accused Pope John Paul of being a Jew. They were thrown out."

Singlaub's wife shares his sentiments on the contras. They met during World War II when she was a Navy ensign working in Navy intelligence. They live in Colorado and have three children.

Liteky gave up his job with the Veterans Administration in San Francisco to devote himself to his Central America cause in Washington for the next six months. His wife Judy, a former nun, remains in San Francisco where she is active with the Sanctuary Movement.

An anguishing search for a personal sense of sanctity led Liteky to leave the priesthood. The struggle began about the same time Liteky began to wrestle with America's presence in Vietnam. "I was a hero and a chaplain to boot and all these laymen wanted to hear my rationale for Vietnam. I spoke a lot." Then one day a comment from someone in the audience changed Liteky's life. "He said I was going to have to rise above," says Liteky, using the phrase that has stayed with him all these years, "the assumptions of your subculture." I realized that my Catholicism holds for a 'just war' theory."

It took him six years to leave the priesthood. "I began my appeal to the pope three times and twice I had to stop the process. It was too emotional for me." Finally, he realized, "I was dying emotionally. I had the choice of facing the anxiety of leaving or live with the depression of staying. I felt I was living a lie."

Liteky is impervious to the guarded responses from the elected officials of Washington when he says he might consider a fast to dramatize his views. He has a home-made sign that says, "For God's Sake Stop the Killing." He intends to walk the streets with it. What would he say to those who think he is just another picketing loon in Washington? "I would talk to them about the lunacy of what we are doing in Central America."

Yesterday, down by the Reflecting Pool, Singlaub christened a Medivac helicopter, paid for by funds raised by the Conservative Digest and bound for Central America. Phrases like "on behalf of the military man" and "the lonely foot soldier" flowed: "Now at isolated outposts in faraway places, he listens with thirsty ear for the sound of a distant trumpet . . . let us at last ignore the senseless din of those who have counseled retreat . . ." Singlaub quoted John F. Kennedy's "proudest boast—'*Ich bin ein Berliner*.'"

"As we face a communist menace at our own back door," continued Singlaub, "those who love liberty more than life can say with equal pride and equal right, '*Yo soy una contra!*'"

"*Venceremos!*"